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Correctional officer and parole officer pay raises, offender health care funding highlight TDCJ's Legislative Appropriations Request

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) for the FY 2016-17 biennium has been submitted to the Governor's Office and the Legislative Budget Board (LBB). In addition to requesting funding necessary to maintain current operations, the LAR identifies 12 priorities for additional appropriations, the largest being a \$235 million "exceptional item" which would provide a 10 percent pay raise to correctional officers and parole officers, to include ranking correctional officers as well as Laundry and Food Service managers.

The second largest exceptional item involves additional funding requested by the university health care providers. These two items alone - correctional officer/parole officer pay raises and offender health care - account for about three-fourths of the new funding requested.

Additional funding is also sought for renovation and repair of existing facilities, contractually required per diem increases, proba-

tion supervision, reentry, mental health and substance abuse treatment, parole halfway house beds and hiring more Office of Inspector General investigators.



In addition, the agency's LAR expresses support for an across-the-board pay raise for all state employees as well as funding to ensure the state's employee pension program remains fiscally sound for the long term.

Approval of the agency's LAR by the Board of Criminal Justice, which occurred during their August 22 meeting, and subsequent submission to the governor and LBB are the first steps in a budget process that will not conclude until May 2015 at the earliest. During the fall there may be one or more hearings in which the appropriations request is

discussed with legislators or their staff. The first version of the general appropriations bill will be filed once the legislative session begins in January 2015, and that bill will provide the starting point for five months of deliberation in legislative committees and on the House and Senate floor. Once approved by the Legislature, the state's budget for the next two fiscal years will go to the governor for approval.

According to TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston, the agency's responsibility to exercise fiscal restraint is reflected in the FY 2016-17 budget request, which only seeks additional funding for items considered to be of critical importance.

"Pay raises to enhance recruitment and retention, funding to maintain adequate offender health care and other increases requested are directly related to meeting our basic operational requirements regarding incarceration, supervision and treatment," said Livingston. "We have once again attempted to balance our responsibilities as

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fiscal stewards with the significant policy or operational issues identified in our appropriations request.”

Although funding for the state employee pension program is not in the TDCJ budget, Livingston said maintaining a fiscally sound retirement system is another agency priority. The pension program is administered by the Employees Retirement System.

Livingston also emphasized that the agency will continue using the TDCJ website and Connections newsletter to keep employees informed of fiscal and policy developments impacting TDCJ employees.

A copy of the TDCJ Legislative Appropriations Request, as well as a brief summary of the LAR, is available on the TDCJ website. ●